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BCSCC REPORT ON OKANAGAN LAKE, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

In early 1991, Nippon Television (NTV) became one of many groups to have launched a search for Ogopogo, the reputed monster said to inhabit Okanagan Lake in south-central British Columbia. Bucking the trend of usually conducting expeditions in the summer months, when sightings are more plentiful, NTV elected to conduct their search activities in the dead of a cold Canadian winter, when visibility on Okanagan Lake can be reduced to a matter of meters during snowstorms that can sometimes turn the lake into a freezing maelstrom. The British Columbia Scientific Cryptozoology Club (BCSCC) assisted NTV with its project, serving in an advisory capacity.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Heading the NTV expedition were Michihito Ogawa, producer; Hidegetsu Honda, director; and Sakuji Yoshimura, an Egyptologist from Waseda University in Tokyo. The choice of Yoshimura as an "expert" on cryptids appeared to stem from his gregarious personality and his ability to make bizarre statements—such as the one about his desire to "give Ogopogo a big kiss" if the animal were captured. Having set some of these idiosyncracies aside, the expedition began testing its equipment on February 27 and 28, 1991. Complementing their sealed underwater cameras was NTV's own remotely operated vehicle (ROM) which was to be used in conjunction with *Deep Rover,* an underwater vehicle piloted by an on-board operator (Fig. 1). *Deep Rover* was supplied by Can-Dive Services Limited of North Vancouver, and was piloted by Steve Fuzessery.

On March 1, the NTV crew set off aboard a houseboat carrying the cameramen, and a barge which was used to transport *Deep Rover.* The morning calm was disrupted when the barge was unable to pass under the Okanagan Lake bridge because the crane to be used for lifting *Deep Rover* into the water was too tall to allow passage. Attempts were made to rectify the problem, and it was finally decided to pump the barge full of water for ballast purposes. The maneuver worked, and the barge and crane were able to pass below the bridge, but not without making contact with the span above on several tension-fraught occasions. However, after having brought the barge safely through, the houseboat began spewing oil and sending out clouds of smoke. After this reversal, it was decided to abandon search attempts that day, and to return to the hotel to regroup.

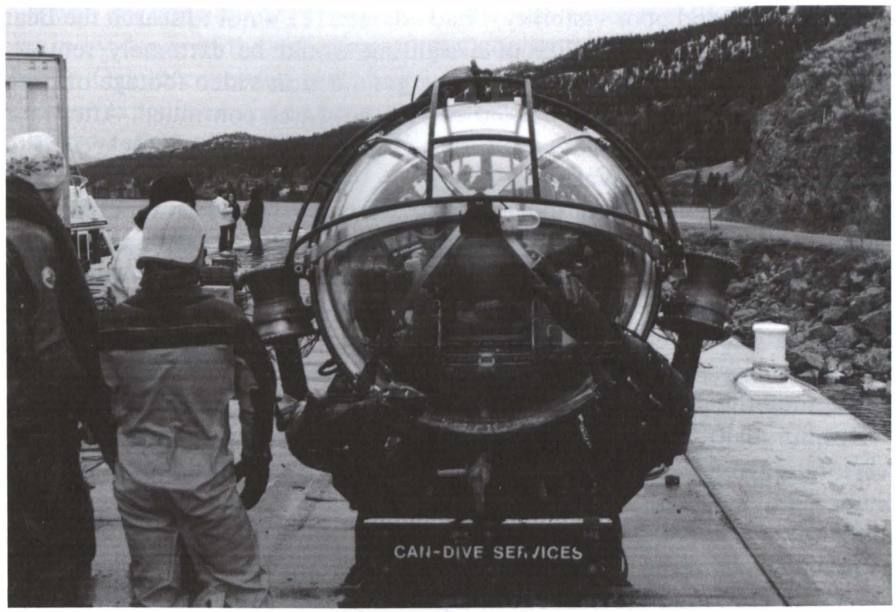

FIG. 1.—*Deep Rover,* an underwater vehicle used by the NTV team in their search for Ogopogo in Okanagan Lake. The vehicle performed flawlessly to a depth of 840 feet (255 m). (John Kirk.)

On the morning of March 2, the NTV party switched from the crippled houseboat to a massive cabin cruiser. All was smooth sailing, as both the barge and cruiser arrived safely at the deepest point of the lake, close to the Okanagan Lake Resort, 7.5 miles (12 km) north of Kelowna.

Pilot Steve Fuzessery navigated *Deep Rover* across the lake bottom. It performed flawlessly at a depth of 840 feet (255 m), in search of tell-tale signs of any large creatures. Fuzessery located a large tube-like imprint on the lake bottom, but it was impossible to conclude if this was an Ogopogo trace. No further discoveries of note were made, and operations were terminated. While NTV was in action, the author, president of BCSCC, had opted to remain on shore to conduct observations from the Kelowna lake front. During the course of my investigations, I noticed two large patches of foaming bubbles not far from my vantage point on the east side of the lake. The duration of the bubbling led me to conclude that the source of the bubbles was natural gas escaping through a fissure on the lake bottom. These bubbles have obviously been mistaken in the past for signs of Ogopogo's presence or activity by witnesses who were unaware that the Okanagan Valley is dotted with thermal vents, the vestiges of its former position as a center of volcanic activity.

Bear Creek was the location of the next intensive search. Because of the

choppy waters and poor visibility, I had advised NTV not to search the Bear Creek area, as the possibility of a sighting would be extremely remote. However, NTV was intent on obtaining good action video footage of both the ROV and *Deep Rover* in action, and so the search continued. After four hours of futility, *Deep Rover* was returned to the surface and packed off to another assignment in Washington state.

We then headed to Rattlesnake Island, which has long been reputed to be the residence of Ogopogo. Weather conditions had improved significantly, and under sunny skies and calm water divers scoured the shelf under the island for signs of caves—where Ogopogo is said to dwell. No caves of any significant size were found, and to add yet another damper to the search, one of the cameramen dropped his camera; it slid to the bottom and was lost among the rocks.

Despite slightly better weather, the next day's activity proved totally fruitless. Veteran Ogopogo researcher Arlene Gaal and myself both felt that the chances of detecting an Ogopogo during turbulent winter weather were virtually nil, and we both stood on the sidelines wondering if anything was to come of this costly exercise in futility.

As if to confound the onlookers, a partial breakthrough was obtained by March 7. Sonar equipment had not been employed to its fullest extent, and when it was fully utilized, a promising observation was made. Late that morning a 33–40-foot (10–12-m)-long object appeared on the sonar screen at a depth of between 330 and 400 feet (100–120 m). The object was animate, and appeared to be a living animal. However, procrastination by the NTV investigators allowed whatever was below the surface to slip away before anyone would adhere to a course of action.

With a seemingly endless budget at its disposal, NTV lengthened the flights of a search helicopter provided by Canadian Helicopters, an Okanagan-based firm. Despite covering vast tracts of the 79-mile (127 km) lake, no sightings or any unusual activity were recorded. With nothing to show for its efforts, NTV spent one last day combing the lake and filming eyewitness testimony before ending the venture after 8 exhausting days.

Results

It has always been the position of BCSCC that any search or investigatory activities at Okanagan Lake should be entered into during the months of June, July, and August, when most Ogopogo sightings are reported. By launching an expedition during one of the most brutal winters in recent British Columbia history, NTV erred in the extreme. Wave heights were such that any object on the surface would have been lost in the flurry of whitecaps. Subsurface activity would have been almost impossible to zero-in on as surface vessels were buffeted and moved by volatile waves. Visibility was often reduced to less than 300 feet (91 m) by blowing snow and fog.

It was our considered opinion that NTV was never in a likely position to obtain evidence of the existence of an Ogopogo-type animal. Producer Michihito Ogawa conceded that, had it not been for production deadlines, a summer expedition would have been the better option.

In view of the above, outside groups who wish to investigate the Ogopogo problem would be well-advised to first discuss their plans with individuals like Arlene Gaal, or groups like BCSCC, who by trial and error or by experience are better equipped to conduct fieldwork at Okanagan Lake.

Any expedition to Okanagan Lake should take a leaf out of the notebook of the now-defunct Loch Ness Investigation Bureau (LNIB). LNIB carried out painstaking investigations over long periods of time in the 1960's, using the services of copious amounts of volunteers and numerous still and movie cameras. Add to this the use of sonar and strategic positionings of personnel around the lake, and one has a model of what investigation at "monster lakes" should be like. Short forays by ill-trained observers are very unlikely to produce sightings or evidence. Meticulous attention to detail and planning are the only means by which an investigation will be effective.

Although the NTV participants did not adhere to the Loch Ness model of investigative technique, they are nonetheless to be commended for the enthusiasm with which they approached their task. Their willingness to expend large sums of money in search of Ogopogo should serve as a catalyst to others who have the financial means to contribute towards the solution of the mystery present at Okanagan Lake.

Future Plans

BCSCC had no firm plans for 1992 fieldwork. Due to prevailing economic conditions, sponsors have not been able to fund the Club's field activities. If any expeditions are undertaken in 1992, they will be greatly reduced and of short duration. Should sponsorship be forthcoming, BCSCC is considering a two-month-long visit to "monster lakes" across North America. These lakes would include Okanagan Lake, Lakes Pend Oreille and Tahoe, Flathead and Payette Lakes, as well as Lakes Champlain, Memphremagog, and Erie.